UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
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August 3, 2009

John Brent,
Fort Benning Directorate of Public Works
Environmental Management System
Meloy Hall (Bldg 6), Room 310
Fort Benning, GA 31905

Subject: EPA NEPA Comments on Department of the Army (DOA) Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCOE), Fort Benning, Georgia; CEQ No. 20090219; ERP No. USA-E11069-GA

Dear Mr. Brent:

To fulfill EPA's Clean Air Act (CAA) § 309 and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) § 102 (2)(C) responsibilities, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed DOA's FEIS for the MCOE. The enclosed comments are consistent with those EPA has previously provided written NEPA comments on the Draft EIS (DEIS) in a letter dated January 26, 2009[1] and pertinent to changes made since publication of the DEIS.

Background

Fort Benning comprises 181,275 acres within three counties and two states and is predominantly in the Chattahoochee River Basin (CRB). Approximately 80% of Chattahoochee County, Georgia, is within the Fort's boundaries. It is the sixth largest in land area and the third largest in troop size of all of the Department of Defense (DOD) installations. The Fort's November 2007 population baseline consisted of 26,500 military, civilian, and contractor personnel and 9,400 students being trained on any one day. The anticipated total population increase is expected to be: 43,114 military, civilian, and contractor personnel, and a daily average student population of 17,757. Approximately 86 percent (157,025 acres) of the Fort, has been designated for training and maneuver areas: 48,171 acres for 83 light maneuver training areas, 62,958 acres for 86 heavy maneuver training areas,15,554 acres for a live-ordnance-impact area ("dudding"), and 30,342 acres designated for a non-dudded impact area that can be used for light maneuver training.

Since the November 2006 *BRAC 2005 and Transformation EIS* record-of-decision publication, new projects and modifications to previous projects are needed and require re-evaluation which is the purpose of this EIS. The proposed action's purpose is to address the new Armor School training projects, re-evaluate modified BRAC 2005 and Transformation EIS

[1] Addressed to John Brent, Fort Benning Directorate of Public Works, from Heinz J. Mueller, Chief, NEPA Program Office.

projects, accommodate Army-growth decisions, and support the MCOE standup. The need is to provide sufficient operational facilities, training areas – including ranges and maneuver areas, and infrastructure to accommodate the consolidated Armor and Infantry Mission of the MCOE and the increased military personnel and students. Three alternatives were evaluated and Alternative A was identified as the preferred alternative.

The proposed action as described in the DEIS included the construction, operation, and maintenance of additional facilities (community services, hospital replacement, personnel support, classroom, barracks, and dining facilities), drinking-water-treatment plant upgrade and expansion with the construction of a new intake from the Chattahoochee River, rail-loading facility expansion, and two road projects, and training areas, including ranges and maneuver areas. Construction will occur within the Georgia boundaries of the Fort in three cantonment areas: Main Post, Sand Hill, and Harmony Church.

Changes between DEIS and PEIS

Since the publication of the DEIS, changes have been made to the preferred alternative (PA). The FEIS anticipates the PA to reduce landscape impacts, i.e., total disturbed acres, by 696 acres. These changes appear to be in response to the formal U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) jeopardy determination and include: the reduction of the construction footprint in many of the tank trails, roads, and ranges; relocation of the Multi-Purpose Training Range to coincide with the existing Hastings Range; elimination of the Multi-Purpose Machine Gun 1 and 2 Ranges; and reduction of the construction footprint of the Vehicle Recovery Course.

Disturbed Acreage

Using the FEIS' location categories and data metric of disturbed acres (DA), it appears that the *Installation Wide, Harmony Church, Sand Hill*, and the *Main Post* categories' DA footprints have been reduced by 31%, 25%, 23%, and 58%, respectively, while DA footprints for *Northern Range*, and *Southern Range* have increased 14%, and 107%, respectively.

The FEIS states the major redesign changes have occurred especially to range and training-related projects to the extent that a reduction in approximately 14,000 less acres of total land disturbance would occur.[2] This statement appears inconsistent with the rest of the FEIS and needs additional explanation. Per the FEIS the total disturbed area for the PA is only 10,045 acres. Furthermore, the FEIS proposal reportedly may realize a decrease in impact of 696 acres compared to the DEIS. It also appears inconsistent with the information provided in Tables ES-2[3] and 3.4-1.[4] These tables indicate that both the North and South ranges have increased, not reduced, their disturbed acreage footprint under the FEIS' version when compared to the DEIS' version by 513 and 2,750 acres, respectively. Furthermore an analysis of the DA footprint reveals that these two tables indicate that the FEIS PA DA footprint actually increased by 2,132

[2] P. 4-164.
[3] P. ES-17 in both the FEIS and the DEIS.
[4] P. 3-8 in both the FEIS and DEIS.

acres, not decreasing by 696 acres. The FEIS remains unclear regarding the degree of environmental impacts and where they are occurring.

With regard to the significant changes in the DA footprint for the various locations, the FEIS does not provide specifics as to what these changes entail or how these changes will impact the environment. For example, the DA foot print attributed to the water treatment plant upgrade and expansion has been reduced from 260 acres (DEIS) to 47 acres (FEIS) and no specifics on what this change entails or the impacts (benefit?) to the environment.[5] In addition, the relocation of the Multi-Purpose Training Range to coincide with the existing Hastings Range implies heavier and more intensive use of this range but little information is given as to how this change may impact the surrounding areas, e.g., surface waters and wetlands. For example, what are the background soil contamination levels of the Hasting's Range now and what are the likely changes to that background as it is subject to more intensive use? What are the potential indirect and cumulative effects to ground and surface waters associated with wet-weather events?

Aquatic Habitats

EPA notes that in the FEIS' executive summary, "aquatic habitats" is missing from Table ES-4. This table comparatively summarizes the alternatives' environmental impacts. "Aquatic habitats" was present in this table in the DEIS.[6] Since the executive summary is that part of the FEIS most likely to be read by the decision maker and the public, it should be complete.

The FEIS states that construction, demolition, road upgrades, and range projects will likely directly impact up to 902 acres of aquatic habitats and wetlands. The range and non-range projects will likely impact 788 acres of freshwater aquatic habitat (impoundments and flowing streams) and three percent of the total existing aquatic habitat area at the Fort. While these affected aquatic habitats will not necessarily be eliminated, their functions and values will likely be degraded by direct or incidental filling, vegetation removal, hydrological alterations, and sediment/pollutant inputs. Reportedly the residual impacts to aquatic habitats and wetlands will still be significant despite mitigation measures.

The FEIS notes that its mitigation measures will not avoid or alleviate significant impacts to all aquatic habitats and wetlands, particularly where range areas will unavoidably impact wetlands. Stream crossings, sedimentation, and erosion would degrade natural features and processes of aquatic communities. A substantial area of wetlands is expected to be lost or decreased resulting in degraded ecosystem functions, i.e., maintenance of water quality and associated fish and wildlife populations.[7]

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[5] P. 4.7.2.2 Alternative A, p. 4-98, does not discuss the changes between the DEIS and FEIS regarding the water treatment plant.
[6] It is present in the DEIS on p. ES-33 and would be expected on p. ES-35 of the same table in the FEIS.
[7] P. 4-177.

Water Quality

Intensive Heavy Maneuver Training in Highly Erodible Soil Areas

Excluding the dudded-impact and restricted areas, of the 84,925 acres available for heavy maneuver training there are at least 51,035 acres of highly erodible soils. Of the 73,826 acres available northeast of Hwy27-280 for heavy maneuver training, 44,074 acres (59.7%) are highly erodible soils. Approximately, 2,936 acres in the southern maneuver area are expected to result in 100% habitat degradation over time in the off-road heavy maneuver areas.[8] And due to personnel increases, an additional 1,922 square-mile days are now needed for one USAARMS training course bringing the total heavy maneuver requirement up to 69,873 square miles, which is a 156% net increase with the implementation of BRAC and MCOE.[9]

The combination of increased heavy maneuver training, terrain, and soil conditions set the stage for major soil erosion problems and since soil erosion can quickly escalate, substantial damage to the landscape can be realized without prompt and routine maintenance. The FEIS indicates a combination of institutional and engineering controls will be used to proactively manage these impacts. The USFWS Biological Opinion indicates the only source of repair appears to be the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).[10] EPA strongly recommends the Fort should have an organizational structure and strategies to proactively manage and abate significant training-related impacts upon highly erodible soils throughout the Fort, particularly in the maneuver areas independent of the NRCS.

Increased number of stream crossings

Additionally, the number of water crossings appears to have increased to 302 (FEIS)[11] from 105 (DEIS).[12] It is unclear what the water-quality cumulative effects will be from a three-fold increase in the number of stream crossings. While hard crossings help to mitigate sediment loadings to streams, they to have their own environmental impacts (direct, indirect, and cumulative) which haven't been discussed. Furthermore dry-weather effective BMPs for maneuver-training activities may not be as effective for wet-weather events activities, which may have unmitigated impacts not yet identified or discussed. The concern is that the Army's attempts to address the USFWS jeopardy determination may have unintended and unidentified consequences to water quality. EPA encourages the Army limit as possible the number of stream crossings, to develop wet-weather best management practices (BMPs) for maneuver-training activities, and to monitor the impacts associated with the increased stream crossing and wet weather activities in order to obtain feedback on the design and effectiveness of implemented BMPs so that the Army can make the necessary improvements to minimize water-quality impacts.

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[8] USFWS Biological Opinion, p.73.
[9] Id, p. 17.
[10] Id, p. 23.
[11] P. 4-172.
[12] P. 4-154.

Future Water Quality Impacts

EPA remains concerned over the use of soil berms to collect spent munitions in the live-fire ranges and their potential to collect spent-ammunition associated pollutants and accumulate into concentrations threatening surface and ground water supplies, requiring costly, future clean up. Furthermore there are local police departments taking the initiative to exceed federal and state environmental requirements by using bullet traps to prevent water quality and other environmental impacts. Consequently, EPA repeats its recommendation and encourages the use of design and technology to address this concern as a preventative measure in lieu of monitoring and taking action when problem has been identified.

Wetlands

Since EPA has Clean Water Act (CWA) § 404 oversight responsibilities regarding ACOE issued § 404 permits, EPA provided it concerns in its PEIS comments the Army with timely wetlands and mitigation guidance to facilitate the Army meeting its BRAC/MCOE schedule. Additionally, EPA has communicated its concerns to the Savannah ACOE district who is responsible for issuing the appropriate § 404 permits.[13] EPA continues to be concerned with the proposed action's impacts to wetlands because the specific designs for the proposed action's various projects are still relatively conceptual; thus proposed may not represent actual impacts when projects are initiated. Furthermore, no demonstration exists that these projects represent the least damaging practicable alternative with the maximum avoidance and minimization as required by the CWA. Additionally, EPA has considerable concern regarding the FEIS mitigation proposal to purchase a conservation easement on a 488-acre Upatoi Creek Tract. This proposal will only preserve the *impaired* Upatoi Tract and within the next 18 months use a large number of credits for the 2009 and 2010 projects. Another concern is over the possibility for the remaining credits to be reserved for future projects. This proposal is inconsistent with the Mitigation Rule and both the Savannah COE District's published mitigation guidance and its Standard Operating Procedure. EPA's concerns have been communicated in detail to the Savannah COE District. EPA can further assist Fort Benning with addressing its wetlands concerns if it can be included in the Fort's NEPA review process; i.e., the FB Form 144-R process for all projects related to wetlands.

EPA also notes that the USFWS is requiring as "treatment" for the Redcockaded Woodpecker (RCWs) jeopardy finding, the harvest of stands overstocked with trees and too dense for suitable habitat,[14] yet it remains unclear how this treatment may impact wetlands. For example, are any wetlands affected? Any conversion of one type of wetlands, e.g., forested, to another wetland type (i.e., non-forested) is considered a permanent wetland impact or functional loss. The EIS does not discuss the issue whether compliance with the RCW Reasonable and Prudent Alternatives (RPA) and measures (RPMs) will have additional wetlands or water quality impacts associated with thinning some stands. The concern is that the Army's attempts to

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[13] EPA's July 24, 2009 letter addressed Colonel Edward J. Kertis, District Engineer, Savannah ACOE, from Thomas C. Welborn, Chief, Wetlands, Coastal and Oceans Branch.

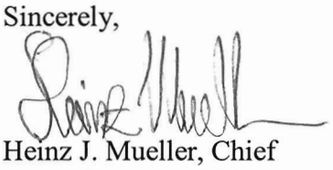
[14] US FWS Biological Opinion (p. 25), which was not included in the DEIS for EPA's review and consequently since EPA was unaware of this situation, was unable to raise this concern in its DEIS comments.

address the USFWS jeopardy determination may have unintended and unidentified consequences upon wetlands. Consequently, EPA encourages the Army to further consider, evaluate, monitor, and appropriately mitigate environmentally impacts associated with addressing the RCW issue.

EPA is unable to fully determine what is happening where and the associated impacts from reviewing what appears to be more of a program-level document describing several operations occurring in several different areas and some of which may have significant environmental impacts despite mitigation. Furthermore, the Army's use of total disturbed acres as its landscape metric doesn't appear to reflect the quality or value of the landscape being disturbed. This metric may have value at the programmatic-EIS level but lacks appropriate detail at project level for determining environmental impacts. The NEPA regulations call for an informed decision maker and public.[15] The use of the PEIS approach with tiered NEPA documentation would have been useful to communicate how various related projects, e.g., projects within the same cantonment or range or geographic area, and EPA would have the opportunity to better understand the proposed action and its resulting impacts. EPA recommends the Army consider a PEIS approach with tiering for any future similar type action.

EPA also encourages the Army to have good cross-program and agency communications regarding the implementation of the proposed MCOE to minimize and appropriately mitigate the associated environmental impacts. Thank you for the opportunity to review and provided comments. If you wish to discuss this matter further, please contact Beth Walls (404-562-8309 or walls.beth@epa.gov) of my staff.

Sincerely,



Heinz J. Mueller, Chief
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[15] 40 CFR §1500.1(b).